

Student Readiness: the Challenge for Colleges

Three experts look at the issues in the national debate

**Kati Haycock, director
of the Education Trust:**

WHEN you ask college presidents what they need most from America's high schools, their answer is swift and unequivocal: students fully prepared for the rigors of college. Tired of struggling with students who need remediation and policy makers who don't want to pay for it, they're looking for some relief—and they're turning to those of us who work in K-12. But those presidents often don't realize how much ensuring college readiness depends not on the schools alone, but on actions that only higher education can take.

One might ask, in this era when almost all high-school graduates go on to some kind of postsecondary education, why can't high-school principals and teachers simply take responsibility for ensuring that their graduates are ready for college-level work?

Ah, but there's the rub. In the vast majority of states, there is no single definition of "ready for college-level work": Each institution is free to define that for itself. And while, at least in my experience, many high-school educators are quite willing to be held accountable for turning out college-ready graduates, they are—as one principal told me recently—not willing to be held accountable for getting their students to "the 47 different definitions of college readiness in effect in my state."

Mind you, nobody is suggesting that all colleges need to have the same *admissions* standards. The difficulty for

high schools lies in preparing students for institutions' different *placement* standards—that is, what constitutes readiness for those first credit-bearing courses in mathematics and English at the college level. That is especially puzzling because most institutions willingly accept credits for those entry-level courses from other institutions. How much harder can it be, then, for colleges to go a little further and set out common placement standards at least in reading, writing, and mathematics?

Work on the creation of consistent placement standards, in states like Kentucky and Louisiana, for instance, suggests that a consensus is not as hard to come by as it might seem. In truth, many institutions—both two- and four-year—want the same core skills and use similar (if not the same) placement tests to find out whether students possess them.

Having such consistent standards is essential, so it is important that higher education start there. To meet the challenge to improve, though, high schools also need help with the following:

- Aligning their courses with those standards, so students don't continue to struggle once they enter college.

- Developing model lessons, units, benchmark assessments, and end-of-course assessments to help teachers improve the quality, consistency, and rigor of courses that sometimes have similar titles but very different content.

- Redesigning courses and repack-

aging core content in a way that will be more engaging to today's students.

- Updating the skills and knowledge of current teachers to ensure that they know that content and how to teach it to all levels of students.

- Educating and preparing a supply of new teachers who are well equipped to teach a rigorous, high-level curriculum to all students.

- Expanding dual-credit offerings to help accelerate students without tak-

schools is not enough. Small initiatives at individual high schools—a mathematics faculty member working with eight math teachers here, an English professor working with 12 English teachers there, or an "early outreach" worker providing weekly counseling to 14 minority students in a middle school—is hardly ever enough to make a real difference for either teachers or students. And in some schools—usually the heavily minority urban schools

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ing too much time from high-school teachers who have to cover the core.

Such initiatives are especially vital for schools with students who are mostly poor and members of minorities and who often have the hardest time getting into and succeeding in college. As new research shows, students who complete at least six (or, better yet, at least 12) college credits while still in high school are far more likely to go to college and graduate.

By focusing its attention on those central tasks of school improvement, higher education can become a partner with schools—rather than simply another burden—in the core work of smoothing the transition between school and college.

Simply put, the usual "help" that higher education provides for local

that are deluged with "help" from such college programs—the initiatives can be seriously counterproductive, leading to "Christmas Tree schools" that, though chock-full of extraneous programs, have no time to concentrate on the instructional core.

Such small steps, though they may well transform the lives of individual students and teachers, don't add up to the big changes we need in our schools today. Given the new energy and focus on high-school reform now sweeping the country, the opportunity is ripe for college leaders to make it clear what students need to get into college and to succeed once there. College presidents need become real partners in the work of changing schools.

Higher education can no longer sit on the sidelines.

**Charles B. Reed, chancellor
of the California State
University System:**

KATI HAYCOCK is correct in saying that higher education needs to do more than simply contribute piecemeal efforts to college preparedness. From my experience managing large university systems in Florida and California, I believe that the key to making a smooth transition between K-12 and college is to establish a direct link between a state's college-readiness standards and its elementary- and secondary-school curricular standards.

The 23-campus California State system tackled the issue on a large scale by working with the California Department of Education and State Board of Education to create the Early Assessment Program. That testing program, which is embedded within the 11th-grade California Standards Test, measures college preparedness in English and mathematics. The program gives students an early signal of their college readiness, then helps them to adjust senior-year course work to get ready for college-level courses. We also offer professional development for English and math teachers to integrate college-readiness standards into their

courses in the eighth through 11th grades.

For such an effort to work, college standards must be fully a part of the K-12 curriculum and assessment, and made available to all students. And, of course, our colleges of education must be able to prepare elementary and secondary teachers who can teach the standards effectively.

We also need to be clear that we are not attempting to limit admissions at institutions that are founded on the promise of access. If we ensure that our admissions decisions are separate from our college-readiness standards, we can then focus on enhancing students' skills—and on helping them make their college experience more meaningful.

The single biggest obstacle to the school-college transition is establishing rigorous standards and high expectations in the public schools



Gregory E. Thornton, chief academic officer in the School District of Philadelphia:

KATI HAYCOCK makes a compelling case for the active involvement of higher education in efforts of K-12 systems to prepare all of their students for postsecondary success. As an administrator in the school district of Philadelphia, a large urban school district serving more than 200,000 students, I agree that it's critical to help students during their complex and challenging transition from high school to higher education.

In our district, we have created a variety of solid relationships with regional colleges and universities. Those institutions work with high schools to

share information about students' readiness for colleges and to support a variety of activities that expose and acclimate students to college life while they're still in high school. Temple University, for example, prepares reports for each Philadelphia high school on how well its enrolled graduates do in the first years of their college education. The Community College of Philadelphia offers a dual-enrollment program called "Advance@College," which houses high-school students on campuses as they take a mix of core and technology-related courses to earn credit that applies to both their high-school and postsecondary degrees.

Particularly in a state like Pennsylvania, with its many colleges and universities, state government has the poten-

tial to be of immense help in promoting secondary-postsecondary alignment. Last fall, for example, our governor announced the formation of a new Commission on College and Career Success, which is charged with promoting the design and adoption of college- and ca-

Department of Education has undertaken several studies that gauge the alignment of the state's 11th-grade assessment with the placement exams of large public universities.

While much more needs to be done, I believe that we are making a good

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reer-ready curricula through collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary institutions. His administration has also created a state finance stream to support dual-enrollment programs in school districts. And the Pennsylvania

deal of progress. The challenges are to sustain our school-college partnerships, to design them with enough flexibility so they remain relevant over time, and to make them useful to all students.

Charles Reed responds:

Gregory Thornton is correct that the transition from K-12 to college is complex and challenging. That's why the schools we have worked with have been appreciative of our efforts. They are just as interested as we are in lining up standards, so that students know what is expected of them. In fact, the main change that our participating

schools have requested is to get the Early Assessment Program test results even earlier than they get them now (in July rather than the middle of August), to get students up to speed as soon as possible.

One of our biggest challenges in the years ahead is to get more students to participate in the program. That involves getting more students to take Algebra II by their junior year because

the subject is required material for the EAP test; providing more in-service to classroom teachers so that they understand and can teach to those standards; and urging more teachers to promote the test.

The EAP, unlike the SAT or ACT, is free, requires only a 30-minute extension of the California Standards Test that students are already taking, and is directly linked to California curricular

standards and California readiness requirements.

Beyond that, the single biggest obstacle to the school-college transition is establishing rigorous standards and high expectations in the public schools. We need to move beyond a culture of low expectations and encourage all students to pursue rigorous programs that provide them with lifelong skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Gregory Thornton responds:

Right now, the specialty programs like White-Williams Scholars, Gear Up, a variety of TRIO programs, Philadelphia Futures, College Access, Student Success Centers, etc., are the most helpful to us. While we work on aligning our standards with those of colleges, such programs provide needed support for disadvantaged students to make sure that they are sufficiently prepared.

Without question, K-16 programs improve access for low-income and minority students. We find that many of our young people, who might not otherwise have considered higher education, respond favorably to visits to college campuses and exposure to students and faculty members. We have institutionalized those kinds of services in our Student Success Centers, which house planning resources for students to help them move successfully toward postsecondary participation. Furthermore, regular meetings of high-school faculty members with representatives from the city's major higher-education institutions help us to align core curricular offerings and assessments across the secondary-postsecondary divide. A college-prep working group has also recently been initiated in the region, with leadership from various universities and college-prep institutions, to speak with one voice on the

priorities and strategies to ensure high levels of college entrance and completion.

Thus I suggest undertaking two types of strategies for other districts. First: putting in place a series of high-quality motivational experiences for young people, getting them excited about the possibility of participating in higher education, and giving them opportunities to have firsthand experiences on campuses with students and faculty members. Second: developing a K-16 consortium that promotes readiness for college and careers. Several kinds of activities come to mind:

- Identify the higher-education institutions where high schools send significant numbers of students, and develop a mechanism for reporting back from those institutions to individual high schools on how well their students performed during their first and second semesters of postsecondary work. That could lead to customized recommendations for preparation of future students.

- In crafting major examinations (e.g., midterm and end-of-course exams), particularly for seniors, involve higher-education faculty members who teach first-year courses to ensure that the assessments are sufficiently rigorous to move students toward college.

- Ask higher-education institutions that admit large numbers of a district's

students to share their placement exams in English and math (at a minimum), and strongly encourage high-school juniors to take them as a means to determine whether they would place into credit-bearing courses. If not, then the senior year can be used to take additional courses. That would also involve professional development, provided by colleges, for teachers on the course work needed for students to be ready.

- Promote dual-enrollment programs, which, by their very nature, require collaboration among faculty members across secondary and postsecondary education.

Pennsylvania's Commission on College and Career Success, an 18-member panel of state, higher-education, K-12, and business leaders, will make a series of recommendations, by December 2006, on increasing the readiness of Pennsylvania's young people for active and productive citizenship. That includes looking at a core curriculum for all high-school students.

Given Pennsylvania's strong tradition of local control, it seems unlikely that our state will mandate a curriculum, regardless of its merits. In Philadelphia, we've developed our own curriculum, which we believe does, in fact, prepare our students for success. Having gone through the process, however, I can tell you that it is extremely time-consuming and expensive. There-

fore, if the commission could develop a proposed college- and career-ready curriculum for districts to consider, even if adoption were voluntary, that would be of considerable value.

I believe that most educators understand the importance of developing common expectations among K-12 and postsecondary institutions on core academic skills. So why doesn't it happen more often? One reason, certainly, is the amount of time that it takes to do it well. Teachers teach, administrators manage, and students study and, we hope, learn. It takes a major commitment of all parties to find the time to sit down and thoughtfully consider how to align curricula and assessments. Another obstacle is leadership: Alignment must be viewed as "mission critical." In addition, we often talk about the academic component of college success but forget about the cultural transition. Preparing African-American and Latino students for predominantly white, middle-class campuses is often not something that is adequately addressed.

I'm pleased that a number of voices are now being raised in this cause. The Education Trust, Achieve Inc., and the National Governors Association are among the growing number of national organizations that are championing college and career readiness. So, despite the obstacles, I'm optimistic that we will continue to make progress.